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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2017
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KPAL
SUBJECT: FM KOUCHNER'S SEPT. 19-21 VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (B & D)

¶1. (C) The Bernard Kouchner who arrives in Washington Sept. 19 remains both an extremely popular French politician and one of the few of President Sarkozy's ministers who has retained a margin of independent authority. Kouchner, the most prominent of the Socialists who accepted positions in the Sarkozy government, continues to lead the polls as France's most popular political figure. (With a 69% favorable rating, he is well ahead of other ministers -- and even of Sarkozy himself, who comes in at 64%). At a time when other ministers have receded so deeply into Sarkozy's shadow as to become invisible, Kouchner remains very much in charge on a number of issues -- Darfur, Lebanon, and Kosovo, for example. While other Ministers are routinely contradicted by the President (including the Prime Minister, whom Sarkozy has referred to publicly as his "collaborator," a fancy term in French for staffer), Kouchner's voice is strong and authoritative. That said, and despite the good personal rapport with Sarkozy, who admires him as a man of conviction and concrete accomplishment, Kouchner will not have an easy time managing his portfolio in the era of a hyperactive President who wants to be seen as in charge of everything. Kouchner's one stumble since assuming office -- when his briefing to Parliament on the Government's engagement of Libya over the Bulgarian medics demonstrated near-perfect ignorance of the facts -- is not necessarily his last. Sarkozy and Kouchner appear to be fashioning a coherent foreign policy -- based on a realistic view of what France brings to the table, a less ideological approach to issues, greater pragmatism in achieving objectives, and less aversion to working closely with the U.S. The byword for France's re-positioning vis-a-vis the U.S. will continue to be "convergence, not alignment."

APPARENT MIND-MELD WITH SARKOZY ON FUNDAMENTALS: THE
TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP, IRAN

¶2. (C) When Kouchner agreed to become Sarkozy's foreign minister, he knew he was signing up to work for a President who would favor more substantial transatlantic engagement and greater day-to-day cooperation -- including on the security dimension. It is an orientation he shares. Sarkozy's will clearly be the decisive voice on how far France is willing to go on a "reform of NATO and France's relationship with it," as he put it in his major foreign policy speech of August 27. But we judge that Kouchner will not be the one applying the brakes, despite the Gaullist reflexes of many of the Quai's old hands. Kouchner, like Sarkozy, is ready to break the

mold where he is convinced it serves France's interests as a medium-sized power that should maximize the twin advantages of a leading position in the EU and a close, cooperative relationship with the U.S. Both feel fully empowered to engineer change at the beginning of their respective terms, at a time when the opposition is weak, and the blowback from daring initiatives such as Kouchner's visit to Iraq has been minimal. While Sarkozy has very definitely set the direction and tone on Iran policy, and the Elysee is managing the outreach to Tehran, Kouchner is clearly comfortable with the hardening of the French line: Three weeks after Sarkozy publicly warned about the "catastrophic choice between an Iranian bomb and a bombing of Iran (terming only the first of these "unacceptable"), Kouchner publicly observed on Sunday that given Iran's behavior, "we must prepare for the worst, in other words, war," and called for EU sanctions against Tehran.

THREE KOUCHNER ISSUES: LEBANON, IRAQ AND KOSOVO

13. (C) Even in comparison with the peripatetic Sarkozy, Kouchner has been no slouch. Since assuming office in on May 19, he has made 19 visits abroad. He has personally associated himself with, and publicly taken the lead on, three issues in particular: Lebanon, Iraq and Kosovo. Arriving in Washington, he will be coming off his fourth visit to the Middle East. Active across the clutch of Middle East issues, he has taken headline-grabbing initiatives on Lebanon and Iraq. In both cases, he has sought to keep a distance from the U.S., while working to achieve shared objectives. On Lebanon, his efforts to facilitate dialogue across the entire political spectrum have brought him close to U.S. and Chirac-era red lines, and a more risk-averse

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reading of what is politically possible in Beirut has led him to different tactical conclusions. However, remaining in synch with the U.S. remains a guiding principle of his Lebanon policy. Visiting Iraq, he announced France's return as an independent actor, not as reinforcement for the U.S. Declaring that the U.S. "has lost the war," on the one hand, he re-engages France in Iraq on the other, calling for greater EU and UN involvement in support of political reconciliation and institutional reconstruction that would permit gradual U.S. military disengagement. On Kosovo, the pattern has been similar. A distinct voice and tactical differences with the U.S. -- insisting on the need for the appearance of a credible negotiating process, including consideration of options other than independence -- are offset by a bottom-line requirement to work closely with the U.S. to achieve a common strategic objective.

KEY POLICY ISSUES: WHERE THE FRENCH ARE COMING FROM

14. (C) We expect that, time permitting, Kouchner would want to address the range of Middle East issues, Darfur, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and NATO. Herein follows a snapshot of where the French are on these and other possible subjects of discussion, and where differences over policy or analysis lie. Among Kouchner's top priorities since taking office are Lebanon, Iraq, Israeli-Palestinian peace, and Iran.

15. (C) Lebanon: Kouchner surprised many by his quick plunge into Lebanese politics, organizing a national reconciliation process designed to secure agreement on a new president and a new national government consistent with UNSCRs that preserve Lebanon's sovereignty and limit Syrian (and Iranian) influence. Our partnership with France over Lebanon remains a top priority for the French, but we have divergent views on the stakes involved (the French fear a return to civil war more than a rolling back of gains made over the past two years to limit Syrian interference) and on tactics (the French prefer to press the Lebanese to seek a candidate of "convergence" and are reluctant to give the lead to the March 14 majority). Kouchner in particular is wedded

to a process that accords parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri a prominent role in reaching a solution, partly due to longstanding ties between the two men. He does not seem nave about Berri, but has been prepared to accord him a key role that we do not think is deserved. In his last visit to Beirut, Kouchner challenged Berri to enter into dialogue with March 14 without preconditions. A frank discussion of the limits of our continued partnership is needed as well as our different views of the stakes and tactics to employ. The French concede that the presidential election process will play out until late November, which argues for Washington and Paris to stay in close and constant contact as the various Lebanese factions seek to play us off against the other.

16. (C) Israeli-Palestinian Peace: Kouchner's just-concluded visit to Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon gave him a chance to discuss our efforts at achieving progress on the Israeli/Palestinian negotiations and probe for a potential French role in our planned regional meeting in November. He will press for us to step up our efforts to ensure that Israel and the Palestinians are ready to present evidence of a concrete accord with tangible results rather than another declaration of principles. In addition to asking what role interested parties like France and the Quartet can play in the regional meeting (about whose details the French are impatiently waiting), Kouchner has publicly discussed a possible role for Syria in such a gathering. This seems to be an outgrowth of French policy on Lebanon, which includes offering Damascus a possible place at any regional meeting we would organize on Middle East peace, as well as a reopening of a bilateral dialogue with Paris in exchange for good behavior on Lebanon during the Lebanese presidential election period. Kouchner, who has publicly suggested an eventual visit to Damascus is possible if Syria behaves, will meet his Syrian counterpart in New York and probably hopes to have a clear message to deliver about possible Syrian participation in the November meeting (which Kouchner wants to back a week to accommodate the Lebanese presidential election).

17. (C) Iraq: Kouchner's trip to Iraq confirmed his reputation for the dramatic. While its paternity is uncertain, it was clearly something that Kouchner wanted to do and believed in -- and one which Sarkozy wholeheartedly

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supported. Nevertheless, France has dramatically "turned the page" in its relationship with Baghdad, and Kouchner has made good on his intention to spur the EU to play a more prominent role in Iraqi reconstruction as part of what he hopes will be a strong multilateral effort with the UN in the lead. The French are still developing ideas, however, about what they might do bilaterally. Kouchner is deeply pessimistic about the Iraqi internal political situation but has not repeated his readiness to host a reconciliation process similar to the one he launched for Lebanon. Although he has repeatedly criticized U.S. military intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein (whom he nevertheless said deserved to be overthrown) and subsequent policy (he most recently said the U.S. has already been defeated in Iraq), Kouchner believes a continued U.S. troop presence is vital to prevent the stark humanitarian situation becoming an all-out civil war. He advocates a phased withdrawal but only one accompanied by a rebuilt Iraqi army and police force.

18. (C) Iran: The Presidency has taken the lead on French policy regarding Iran, but Kouchner has recently and most bluntly warned that the confrontation over Iran's nuclear program could lead to military action ("war," in his words, which have left some of his handlers fretting). He and others in the French government repeatedly stress that pressing ahead with ongoing diplomatic efforts (including a possible third round of UNSC sanctions) must be exhausted before any potentially "catastrophic" resort to force. Before seeing you, he will have met with Russian counterparts to explain France's tough line, including Paris, urging of

other EU members to impose sanctions outside the UNSC if necessary. Indeed, France's public hard line seems to be causing others in the EU to rethink their reluctance to undertake such sanctions. Kouchner's ministry was involved in quiet Iranian efforts to open a new channel to France in the hope of splitting France from the P-5 1. He might raise an idea floated by one of his subordinates of a senior-level U.S./French channel that might include the UK to discuss possible U.S. military action.

¶9. (SBU) Europe/European Security issues: Strengthening European security is an important Sarkozy priority. He consistently claims that a strong European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) is "complementary" rather than "competitive" with NATO. In his first major foreign policy speech on August 27, Sarkozy urged EU nations to accept a larger share of defense spending to overcome the shortage of EU defense capabilities and cope with global security threats. He highlighted the imbalance in spending between EU nations, stating "we cannot carry on with four countries paying for security for all the rest." European Defense Agency figures indicate that Britain, France, Italy, and Germany account for 75% of EU defense expenditures; of these four, only Britain and France meet the NATO benchmark of 2% of GDP (NOTE: The latest French figures on defense spending vary between 1.96 and 2.42%, depending on whether the gendarmerie, a force to guarantee civil order, is included).

¶10. (S/NF) NATO/France: In one of his first acts as President, Sarkozy launched a defense white paper commission to review France's defense and security priorities; one component of the report (expected in March 2008) is a review of France's relationship with NATO. The defense white paper could set the stage for a re-integration into the NATO military command. The public debate over a deeper French role in the Alliance was launched this month when Defense Minister Morin gave a speech to defense sector experts in which he openly questioned customary French reticence about NATO. At the same time, our interlocutors have uniformly cautioned against raising expectations and warned that we should not expect to see any major policy shifts in the immediate future (likely not until the defense white paper is well under way). Many (including, significantly, Prime Minister Fillon) remain concerned that abrupt moves toward NATO could be controversial domestically, and argue that, at a minimum, ESDP needs to be strengthened in parallel.

¶11. (C) NATO/Afghanistan: France has approximately 1,000 military personnel based in Kabul, Afghanistan (with additional personnel deployed in surrounding regions such as Tajikistan and the Indian Ocean). The GOF will beef up its training support to the Afghanistan National Army through deployment of 150 additional trainers for Operational

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Mentoring and Liaison teams (OMLTs) by the end of this year. For air support, the French have moved three French Mirage planes from Dushanbe to Kandahar this month, with an additional three scheduled to transfer in October. The September 10 French-German summit reaffirmed plans by the two countries to support the German-led EU police training mission in Afghanistan, although bureaucratic delays, lack of funding and a change of personnel has delayed deployment of this mission. On July 30, SACEUR sent a letter officially requesting six medium lift helicopters to provide rotary-wing support in ISAF (to replace the U.S. helicopters which are scheduled to depart early 2008). This request is still under consideration by the GOF.

¶12. (C) NATO/Georgia: The GOF is ready to give a positive signal to Georgia at the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2-4, 2008), but it prefers that NATO offer "something less than membership." France is opposed to a Georgia Membership Action Plan (MAP) for several reasons, including: concern over creating additional tensions with Russia, a desire to

define the territorial limits of NATO and worries over Georgia's internal problems with separatist regions. The GOF notes that NATO membership should not create new lines of division and that territorial conflicts should be resolved prior to membership (i.e. NATO required that Hungary sign a border treaty with Romania prior to becoming a member); Georgia does not meet these criteria. Therefore, the GOF does not support the USG proposal to have the NAC visit Georgia at the same time as the Secretary General's visit at the beginning of October. The GOF is considering whether NATO could define with Georgia a different kind of status and a different approach to security in their area, possibly combined with incentives including abolishing visa requirements with the EU. The GOF is convinced that Germany, no less than France, opposes NATO membership for Georgia.

¶13. (C) France-EU: President Sarkozy was instrumental in re-activating the moribund political reform process in the European Union with the June negotiation for a shortened "reform treaty" that will simplify some of the EU's operating procedures, while side-stepping efforts towards deepened political integration that doomed the EU constitution in 2005. This "reform treaty" must be approved by the other EU members and could go through ratification over the course of 2008. The French will also take over the rotating EU presidency from July-December 2008 and they plan to focus on immigration, energy, the environment and European defense during their term. Sarkozy remains firmly opposed to EU enlargement to include Turkey. Nevertheless, he has agreed to allow negotiations to open on 30 of 35 chapters, all those compatible with both membership and association. He conditioned his position on EU support for a "Committee of Wise Men" to reflect "without taboos" on the broader questions about the European future: i.e. what is the European identity, what should the EU's borders be, how to handle common issues, and how deep can political integration go. Sarkozy also promotes the formation of a looser "Mediterranean Union" to coordinate policies and relations with the broad spectrum of countries of the Mediterranean basin. Sarkozy's tactical softening on Turkey surely sits well with Kouchner who personally favors Turkey's joining the EU, something he has told us directly, and about which he has agreed to disagree with his President.

¶14. (C) France-Germany: Thus far, President Sarkozy appears to be keeping to the tradition of meeting regularly every couple of months with the German Chancellor. While the summit meeting in July with Merkel was reportedly more tense with disagreements over EADS and Sarkozy's blunt criticism to German FinMin Steinbrück over EU monetary policy, our interlocutors reported that the two leaders reached general agreement on major issues at the most recent September 10 meeting. The French public supports a strong French-German relationship and expects the two leaders to work together closely. This was reinforced when both leaders were heavily involved in reaching agreement on the shortened EU "reform treaty" in June, activating hopes of a reinvigorated "Franco-German" engine to lead the EU. In what the French saw as a major achievement of their Sept. 10 meeting, Merkel signed on to Sarkozy's proposal to convene a "Committee of Wise Men" to reflect on the EU's future. Merkel requested, and Sarkozy agreed, that presentation of the report should be delayed until December 2009, so that it would not be presented during the 2008 French presidency as a "French

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vision," and it would coincide with timing for the next European commission. Managing the relationship with Russia remains important for both France and Germany, with the GOF acknowledging that Germany faces a more acute challenge due to its closer proximity and greater energy dependence on Russia.

¶15. (S/NF) Missile Defense: The GOF was very interested in the latest round of U.S. and Russian talks on missile defense in Paris on September 10, including progress on negotiations

with Poland and the Czech Republic (NOTE: The next round of experts meetings is tentatively planned for early October prior to the meetings of Foreign and Defense Ministers in Moscow). The GOF also agrees that many of Russia's objections to the planned system are politically driven, reflecting an outdated Russian view in which it sees itself as increasingly encircled by NATO.

¶16. (C) CFE: At a recent meeting with Quad European Political Directors, the French expressed support for the CFE regime and for moving forward towards ratification of the adapted CFE treaty. This included support for the current USG "parallel actions" plan and the U.S. proposal to turn Russian forces in Moldova and Transnistria into an international force with a Russian component, as long as the requirement of eliminating ammunition was maintained. However, the GOF is pessimistic that such efforts would succeed in keeping Russia in the CFE. French Political Director Gerard Araud recently informed us that he had been told in Moscow that the "decision is already taken" to suspend Russia's observation of CFE and he added that Kislyak had told him that no flank limits on Russia were acceptable because it was "humiliating" that they should have such limits on their own territory. The GOF supports the upcoming CFE Seminar in Berlin in early October as a chance to give the allies a chance to unify their positions and demonstrate solidarity for the U.S. parallel actions plan.

¶17. (C) Kosovo: Kouchner is working actively to build consensus within the EU on recognition of an independent Kosovo after the December 10 Troika deadline. The GOF is reportedly optimistic about the possibility for consensus on recognition, but less so about the prospects for consensus on the legal basis for an ESDP mission in Kosovo. Since a new UNSCR would provide an agreed basis, France is still pursuing that possibility. Kosovo is on the agenda for Kouchner's meetings with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Moscow on September 17-18, though we have been advised Kouchner will seek to gauge Russian flexibility, not make new proposals.

¶18. (C) Russia: Kouchner will have discussed a full range of topics with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in their meetings in Moscow September 17-18. Generally, the GOF advocates an approach towards Russia that falls between "complacency and confrontation." While Chirac's insistence that the primacy of the Paris-Moscow relationship (in his multipolar world) was inconsistent with even private criticism of Russian behavior, either Sarkozy nor Kouchner have refrained from publicly pointing to official Russian "brutality" (Sarkozy's choice of words). That said, Kouchner's foreign ministry continues to remind us that France and the rest of Europe are a lot closer to Russia than we are, and that it holds an important energy card that many Europeans will ignore at their peril. In other words, France and Europe will have to continue to carefully manage Russia. They will seek, in particular, to avoid aggravating Moscow before the Dec. 10 Kosovo Troika deadline. France recognizes that Russian resistance to MD is politically-driven. While welcoming the U.S. "parallel actions" proposal on CFE, the GOF views prospects for keeping Russia in CFE as poor, and is focused on ensuring Allied unity. France agrees that NATO should send a positive signal to Georgia at the Bucharest summit; however, France is looking for options other than extending the MAP, due to Russia's sensitivities but also France's uncertainty about entering into an Article V commitment to Georgia.

¶19. (C) Africa - Darfur: The Sarkozy government and Kouchner in particular, have taken a strong interest in African issues from the moment they took office. One of Kouchner's first acts was to call for and then host the June 25 ministerial meeting on Darfur. France's efforts have played a positive role in energizing international action. A follow-up meeting on Darfur, to be hosted jointly by the UN

and AU, is to take place on September 21 on the margins of the UNGA, to be followed by a heads-of-state meeting of the UN Security Council on September 25, to address Africa more generally. The latter will be chaired by President Sarkozy (France being the UNSC President in September). The French have firmly supported the deployment of the hybrid UN-AU force in Darfur (UNAMID).

¶20. (C) Africa - Chad: The French have also developed a plan to place a peacekeeping mission in Chad and the Central African Republic, which they see as sharing many of Darfur's problems that would protect refugee and IDPs. The mission would have a French-led EU military component and a UN civpol element. The French would like the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution approving such a mission (which is a legal necessity before the EU can go forward) prior to the September 25 heads-of-state UNSC meeting, with initial deployment to follow shortly thereafter. One stumbling block has been the issue of UN funding for Chadian gendarmes who would serve with the mission. The U.S. and France have been working to resolve this funding issue, which largely centers on UN financing rules.

¶21. (C) Sarkozy's vision for Africa: In a broader sense, President Sarkozy has signaled his own vision of Africa, notably in a speech he gave in Dakar, Senegal, shortly after taking office. The speech was both praised and criticized in France and in Africa -- on the one hand, it was quite frank in advising Africans that they would have to take more responsibility for their own situations and to avoid attributing all of their problems to colonialism. On the other hand, some observers found Sarkozy's tone condescending and paternalistic, i.e., a vestige of the very colonial attitude that he was suggesting that Africans needed to put behind them. On balance, however, the speech, perhaps intentionally provocative, signaled France's continuing strong interest in Africa but also a hope that Africa and its European partners could do business on a more pragmatic and less emotionally-charged basis than has been the case during much of the post-colonial period.

¶22. (S) Colombia: In June of this year, the French pushed Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to release 200 FARC prisoners in an effort to move negotiations for the release of FARC hostages, namely Franco-Colombian Ingrid Betancourt, forward. While this prisoner release has not resulted in negotiations by the FARC, the French are now backing Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's offer to negotiate a hostage deal between the Colombian government and FARC guerrillas. President Sarkozy has spoken by phone to Chavez twice over the past few weeks and Chavez will most likely visit France in the coming months. That said, the French want to show they are doing everything they can to liberate Betancourt while publicly downplaying to the extent possible a role for Chavez. Ingrid Betancourt remains a major media personality in France and the GOF is under a great deal of political pressure to show the government "will leave no stone unturned." Sarkozy is likely aware that without a gesture from the FARC, the Colombians are unlikely to make any further concessions including prisoner releases. Kouchner recently met with Colombian Foreign Minister Araujo, and Sarkozy will meet with Colombian president Uribe on the margins of the UNGA on September 25. Betancourt is reportedly high on the bilateral agenda.

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Stapleton